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ABSTRACT

By setting academic standards, America takes its first critical step toward providing a plan that will create an excellent educational system for the 21st century. It is important for those working on standards and those educating students with disabilities to work together as standards are being developed. Four kinds of standards need to be understood in order to address ways of including students with disabilities. These include content standards, performance standards, opportunity-to-learn standards, and assessment standards. Issues in setting appropriate standards for all students include: (1) educators will focus only on teaching the standards; (2) consensus cannot be reached on what the standards should be; and (3) it is unfair to hold everyone to the same standards because some students start way ahead of others. Criteria are listed that indicate what should be included in standards that are developed by states applying for funds to support education reform through the Goals 2000 Educate America Act. Three approaches designed to include students with disabilities in later phases of standards-related reform are described, with the merits and limitations of each. These approaches include individualized education program-based standards, standards for group gains, and separate standards. Policy and practice recommendations are then offered for content standards and performance standards. (JDD)

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Students With Disabilities & Educational Standards: Recommendations for Policy & Practice

Background

Terms like excellence, higher performance, and better results have become common words in today's educational rhetoric, especially in response to reports of mediocre achievement by America's students. Congress now wants voluntary high standards and state education agencies are specifying the high standards students are to meet. These standards reflect new goals for American students, as well as for American educators.

Despite numerous descriptions, the term used most consistently in discussions of educational standards is "**all**" — the standards are for all. It is important, therefore, for those working on standards and those educating students with disabilities to work together as standards are being developed.

Since all of America's students are to have the opportunity to learn the content of high standards, including them into one framework of standards presents a challenge. A large gap exits between the areas in the educational system that set standards and that implement the opportunities for students to demonstrate their progress toward standards. Raising the performance of American students could take decades. But by setting standards, America takes its first critical step toward providing a plan that will create an excellent educational system for the 21st century.

Definitions

Standards are statements of criteria against which comparisons can be made. They often are established for the purpose of bettering an existing situation and often tend to be value statements about what is important. Standards may be exemplars or criteria used to measure the quantity or quality of something. In some cases, a standard is a threshold score that represents the level of acceptable performance on an assessment of a particular skill or in a particular domain.

Before addressing ways to include students with disabilities, it is important to understand the meaning of each of the following four kinds of standards:

- **Content**
- **Opportunity to Learn**
- **Performance**
- **Assessment**

▶ *Content Standards*
They provide specific knowledge and skills that students should have and be able to do as a result of exposure to the curriculum in each standards-setting activity area. Knowledge includes important concepts, ideas, issues, and dilemmas in a discipline. Skills include, for

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example, thinking, analyzing, communicating, and reasoning.

- ***Performance Standards***
  They define how good is good enough. These standards are generally tied to content standards, indicating the level of competence that must be attained. They describe the nature and quality of student performance that must be demonstrated to be considered acceptable.

  Performance standards can be used at a variety of levels. For individuals, they might be used to determine the grade a student gets or what that student must demonstrate to graduate or receive a particular type of diploma. They can be used to compare the United States to other countries or to make comparisons among schools, districts, and states, to demonstrate progress toward national education goals.

- ***Opportunity-to-Learn Standards***
  Sometimes referred to as delivery standards, they define the conditions of teaching and learning that establish the basis for achieving high content and performance standards.

  Opportunity-to-learn standards are necessary complements to content and performance standards because they put some of the responsibility for outcomes on the schools and school system. Some educators believe these standards are most like the inputs and processes that have long been measured as part of educational accountability.

- ***Assessment Standards***
  These standards provide the guidelines for testing and measuring after content and performance standards are developed.

  Advocates of assessment standards argue that assessments should:
  (a) allow for both system and student level audits of performance,
  (b) measure knowledge and skills across the core disciplines as well as within them, and
  (c) measure the ability of students to apply what they know to realistic problems.

  Most assessment standards that are linked to content areas focus on equitable and non-biased assessment practices. And, most are recommending more authentic, performance-based assessments rather than multiple choice assessments. Instead of emphasizing concepts like reliability and validity, they stress authenticity, generalizability, equity, and fairness.

Issues

Difficult issues surface when educators talk about setting appropriate standards for all students. Among these are the following:

1. Educators will focus only on teaching the standards

When using the word ***standards***, it is assumed that some kind of measurement will take place and that findings will be reported. For example, standards developed by the National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE) have evolved into an extensive compliance and monitoring system. These standards determine accreditation for teacher education programs. Because NCATE accreditation is necessary to validate a program, much time and effort is spent preparing to meet these standards.

In national standards-setting efforts, most educators want to know which standards apply to them and how they will be measured. Standards-setting efforts that are likely to have high impact are those that the federal government has sponsored. Most often sponsorship comes through the Office of Educational Research and Improvement, with major government advisory groups like the National Education Goals Panel being involved in shaping standards certifications. When the government underwrites standards, issues of fairness (ranging from opportunity-to-learn to the use of appropriate comparison groups when assessing progress toward standards), acceptability, and consequences (both rewards and sanctions) seem to acquire more importance.

2. Consensus cannot be reached on what the standards should be

Although most sets of standards go through many rounds of

consensus building and feedback from content area specialists and the community, there will be some disagreement with the final format, content, and principles. For example, take the mathematics standards. They tend to have a constructivist and discovery-learning orientation because the emphasis is on higher-order thinking skills, problem-solving, and using mathematics in connected and meaningful ways. Researchers question the appropriateness of this method of teaching for students with disabilities because they believe they have demonstrated that these students require direct approaches to learn basic skills before they can participate meaningfully in more open-ended inquiry.

3. It is unfair to hold everyone to the same standards because some students start way ahead of others

Every student begins from a different point relative to the standards. To expect that they will meet the same standards at once is unrealistic. However, educators remain concerned about the consequences (the "stakes") attached to the measurement of standards. If standards measure student progress for the purpose of school district comparisons or funding decisions, then the standards would be considered "low stakes" for the student, but "high stakes" for the school districts. Attaching consequences when measuring progress or lack of progress toward standards is already a part of the accountability system in some states

Setting Standards for Standards

Each standards activity needs to have its own set of standards. A technical planning group for the National Education Goals Panel proposed the following list of criteria for content standards:

1. **World class**
2. **Important and focused**
3. **Useful**
4. **Reflects broad consensus building**
5. **Balanced**
6. **Accurate and sound**
7. **Clear and usable**
8. **Assessable**
9. **Adaptable**
10. **Developmentally appropriate**

This list indicates what the planning group will look for in standards that are developed by states applying for funds to support education reform through the Goals 2000 Educate America Act. The group also suggests that states submit a core set of content standards that apply to all students. These standards would be judged on the extent to which they are:

- As rigorous as the national subject-specific standards, and when different, held up to the same review criteria
- Feasible, delimited, and focused so that they can be implemented in the schools
- Cumulatively adequate to give all students the knowledge, skills, and habits needed to succeed in work and to further their own learning
- Encouraging students to integrate and apply knowledge and skills from various subjects
- Reflective of a state consensus-building process that shows what educators and the public within the state are interested in having all students know and be able to do.

These criteria are for content standards only. Much work remains to be done to set criteria for performance standards.

Approaches to Standards

Most of the disciplines setting standards have used inclusive language, indicating that their standards are intended for all students. Yet, few certainties exist about how later phases of the standards-related reform will include students with disabilities. Following are three alternative perspectives on doing this:

▶ ***IEP-Based Standards***
The Individualized Education Program (IEP) can be the basis for student standards. It now serves as the cornerstone for ***process*** accountability by keeping track of numbers of students, placements, and so on. But, it could be used as a vehicle for ***outcomes*** accountability by capitalizing on some of its components. For example, the goals and objectives might be translated into relevant outcomes that match those of the school district or state. The assessment/evaluation component may help define acceptable performance.

Merits	Limitations
They capitalize on the familiarity of the document.	Because the quality of IEPs is highly variable, adding to or changing the format might further increase the variability.
They eliminate another layer of paperwork.	Low standards might be set for students, with the rationalization that they should not experience failure.
By using the concept of "personal best," they correspond with the individualization sought for students on IEPs.	Monitoring IEPs would become even more difficult for monitors, and probably would require new skills and criteria.
IEP procedures require input from parents and students, a procedural component that increases the possibility of realistic goals and expectations.	Aggregating data may be problematic because of IEP individualization; common standards may not be possible.
IEPs are already the basis for reporting to state and federal governments.	

Merits and Limitations for IEP-Based Standards

Developing IEP-based standards has both merits and limitations (see above).

▶ ***Standards for Group Gains***
A system can be set up similar to that used by the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) for evaluating fuel efficiency within the automobile industry. The EPA required car manufacturers to improve the fuel efficiency of every class of car. Not all cars have been made more efficient to the same degree, but, the average performance across the industry was improved. Within education, a system-wide, average standard could be set and improvement for all student groups would be required.

Using a system focused on group gains has both merits and limitations (see below).

Merits	Limitations
All quartiles of students are targeted for improvement, along with the overall system.	There is no guarantee that each student will show a gain.
No one group of students would be targeted for special instruction.	It will be difficult to develop meaningful assessments of progress for the full range of students in schools.

Merits and Limitations for Standards for Group Gains

▶ ***Separate Standards***
A separate system of standards can be created for the students in special education programs. A state that uses a high school graduation exam might establish a different set of high standards for students with disabilities in order to improve the instructional validity of the high school testing program. However, if this approach were carried out for the different categories of disability, there would be more sets of standards than could be handled. For example, 13 categories x 12 content areas in which standards are now being set = 156 sets of standards.

The use of a system with separate standards has both merits and limitations (see page five).

Merits	Limitations
They would be better aligned to students' particular needs.	Expectations may be lowered for students with disabilities.
They might help identify a realistic set of goals or competencies.	Separate standards might legitimize using a less rigorous approach with students with disabilities.
They could be organized around concepts such as communication, functional literacy, and job/employability skills rather than content areas.	They might promote the development of category-specific standards.
	They could narrow curricular choices.
	Educators will have a more difficult time making comparisons in progress with the general population of students.
	They might inhibit achievement and lower the self esteem of students with disabilities.

Merits and Limitations for IEP-Based Standards

Recommendations for Policy & Practice

No easy answers exist. Yet, it is possible to make some recommendations for both content standards and performance standards.

Content Standards

Recommendations for content standards are:

- **Identify one set of standards**
- **Individualize the standards for students receiving special education services**
- **Specify the depth and breadth of instruction for each standard**
- **Require parent/guardian approval.**

There should be one set of content standards — there is no need to identify special education standards. What is important for some students to know is important for all students to know. The content standards of the skills and knowledge required for a trained and informed work force are useful for students at all ability levels.

When content standards are translated into curricular and instructional programs for students, educators are able to prepare individualized standards for students receiving special education services. Some students will need different experiences, levels of service, and instructional accommodations to meet the content standards.

The IEP can serve as a focal point to specify the appropriate depth and breadth of instruction needed for a particular content standard. But, the preferred practice is to move all students to the highest level of content standards by varying the instructional accommodations.

If the IEP team agrees that the highest level of the content standards is not feasible for a particular student, it may decide to address only part or certain levels of a standard. In this way, curricular choices align with the original content standards and only the depth and breadth of instruction changes. The student's IEP must reflect these decisions specifically with support in writing, and agreement from the parents or guardian of the pupil to avoid categorically-based decisions about which standards are appropriate.

▶ ***Performance Standards***

Several recommendations for performance standards are:

- **All students must be assessed for progress in performance within content standards**
- **Accommodations should be used during assessment**
- **If individual student performance is of high stakes to the student (for example, receiving graduation diploma) then a supplement to the document should be used.**

Performance levels need to be defined so that all students can be assessed for progress toward the content standards for which they will be held accountable. ▲

NCEO Policy Directions are a series of reports that address national policy issues related to students with disabilities. This report was prepared by Jim Ysseldyke, Martha Thurlow, and Jim Shriner with input from many individuals.

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About NCEO

The National Center on Educational Outcomes (NCEO), established in 1990, works with state departments of education, national policy-making groups, and others to facilitate and enrich the development and use of indicators of educational outcomes for students with disabilities. It is believed that responsible use of such indicators will enable students with disabilities to achieve better results from their educational experiences.

The Center represents a collaborative effort of the University of Minnesota, the National Association of State Directors of Special Education, and St. Cloud State University.

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